

Nausicaa: victim, helper, or temptress?

Adrian Kelly

Everyone who reads Homer notices the way in which actions, phrases, and motifs are repeated: heroes put on armour in basically the same order every time, Achilles is called ‘swift-footed’ even when he’s sitting still, and stones used as weapons are invariably decisive in determining a fight. The repetition of these elements is one of the signs of tradition – Homer wasn’t the first to call Achilles ‘swift-footed’ or Odysseus ‘much-enduring’; instead, there were generations of bards stretching all the way back from Homer’s time (probably 8th century B.C.) into the Bronze Age (15th–12th century B.C.) and even earlier. A singer in this pre-literate period learned how to compose a poem by copying his elders. So patterns of all types became fixed and refined in an essentially conservative way – just as the verse metre (the *dactylic hexameter*) preserved some very old words, so the needs of oral ‘composition in performance’ kept larger patterns within regular limits.

Audiences therefore became very familiar with the epic world – not only its language, but also its characters and stories, and the ways in which those stories are told – and this familiarity gave rise to a range of expectations about what should happen in a typical circumstance. If we want to ‘hear’ this poetry with that level of knowledge, i.e. to recreate an original audience’s experience of this type of narrative as it was unravelled in performance, we have to reconstruct those associations. Luckily, the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are so large, and use so many patterns so many times, that we usually have a sufficient number of examples in order to understand the basic units with which the poets and their audiences worked. In this article, I want to use this type of approach in order to discuss some of the undercurrents to the encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa in book 6 of the *Odyssey*, and I will focus on some of the qualities of the princess’s character.

Rape?

By looking at other circumstances of this sort in early Greek epic poetry, we learn that there are three types of figure with which Nausicaa may be compared, and the poet uses all three models for his princess. Firstly, she could be a *rape victim*, for it is very dangerous for young women to leave, however temporarily, the household and the company of their male protectors, as several examples in early Greek epic show. The fearful scattering of Nausicaa’s handmaidens at Odysseus’ appearance is a natural consequence, as is the fact that Athene has to instil strength and courage into Nausicaa so as to get her to stay and face this rather undressed and frightening person when he emerges from the undergrowth. Later on in the poem, Nausicaa’s mother Arete sees that Odysseus is wearing clothes from her own household, and asks him a very pointed question about where he got them, obviously fearing for her daughter’s chastity. But, whatever his characters may think, the poet does not take the narrative very far down this path at the moment of their initial meeting, as he immediately tells us that Odysseus was debating within himself whether to stand away from her, or grasp her by the knees. So the rape option is downplayed.

The poet then has two choices. Firstly, Nausicaa could be a *helper* figure, like other (usually female) characters who assist

those they meet outside settlements. Such figures in the *Odyssey* include the nymphs Ino, Leucothea and Eidothea, and the gods Athene and Hermes, but they are to be found throughout early epic poetry. Secondly, she could be a *temptress / monster*, there to destroy the hero and keep him from returning home or reaching his goal. Characters of this latter sort are particularly frequent in the poem, and a list would include the daughter of the Laestrygonian king, Circe and Calypso, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis etc.

Helpful Nausicaa

The poet begins immediately by favouring the first option, as Nausicaa not only receives Odysseus kindly but also instructs her maidens to bathe and clothe him, before she guides him to the outskirts of the city itself at the end of book 6. This will be the princess’s dominant character type throughout Odysseus’ stay on Scheria, but there are several ambiguous hints about the quality of reception he will encounter in the main settlement, and these reflect a similar but subtle ambiguity about Nausicaa herself.

For example, the Phaeacians are characterized several times as unfriendly hosts, while Alcinous’ reception of Odysseus in book 7 is a little hesitant at first, and we might also think of the abuse Odysseus receives from the young Phaeacian men during the games in book 8. This undercurrent is largely to be explained by the uncertainties over Nausicaa’s marriage status – an issue fundamental to the poem as a whole, for the suitors’ siege of Odysseus’ household in Ithaca is driven by their uncertainty about Penelope’s availability in the apparently permanent absence of her rightful husband. So marriage is a crucial theme, and a crucial problem, on Scheria. In fact, it is around this theme that the temptress / monster figure begins to emerge.

Marriage prospects

Athene had alluded to Nausicaa’s coming marriage at the very start of book 6, when she appeared to the sleeping princess in a dream, but Nausicaa herself was too embarrassed to mention it when asking her father for a wagon to take the family’s dirty laundry for a wash in the river. Odysseus also mentions the fact several times, complimenting the princess as a specifically marriageable figure during his initial supplication. Nor does it stop there: observing Odysseus emerging from the bath, Nausicaa expresses to her handmaidens a wish that he should stay and marry her, and she later advises him not to enter the city with her lest the Phaeacians think him her suitor, and become angry at the thought that ‘such a big and fine man’ (as she calls him) should have come to claim her, much beset by suitors as she is. In all this, aside from some fairly obvious flattery of this impressive stranger, she’s advertising herself, her availability and attractiveness. As if to underline the point, her parents do it as well, Alcinous later on expressing a desire that Odysseus should stay and take his daughter for a wife.

In this way marriage and detention become linked in the audience’s mind, for the nymph Calypso (whose Greek name means

'concealer') had wanted Odysseus to remain with her, and Odysseus himself was having such fun with Circe that his men needed to remind him of the journey home. In other words, there is a real risk in these scenes that the hero will become deflected from his return and remain in the eternal netherworld of Scheria with his young princess. Obviously, Nausicaa isn't a monster in the way that Scylla is, nor even as much of a temptress as Circe is, but her character draws on common elements, and these qualities underline her potential to stop Odysseus' return to Ithaca with the same finality as any of his other opponents.

What's the point of doing this, of keeping the audience uncertain about Nausicaa's role and suggesting throughout books 6–8 a hint of hostility or detention? The answer seems to revolve around Odysseus – perhaps unsurprising in a poem named after him. It is well known that his marvellous tales in books 9–12, with their stories of frequently dangerous and violent hosts, encourage the Phaeacian audience to behave properly towards their famous guest by narrating the transgressions (not to mention punishments) and general beastliness of those who haven't done so in the past. But, armed with the type of knowledge which an ancient audience had, we can now see that Nausicaa, and specifically her oscillation between helper and harmer, plays a crucial role in the way he shapes these tales.

Delicate situation

Odysseus is well aware of her 'threat', and so his stories are also directed to disarming this potential in his relationship with his hosts. Of course, when he had offered his daughter's hand in book 7, Alcinous had already reassured him that he would not compel him to stay, but the situation is delicate, for Odysseus has to avoid offending his host and at the same time make clear his intention to return home. In other words, the suggestion of this temptress theme makes the challenge facing Odysseus seem even more difficult. How does he cope? Well, not by downplaying the sexual adventures of his voyage; indeed, he makes a point of his time with Calypso and Circe, and he uses these stories in order to draw out a twin lesson – firstly, he did once make the mistake of allowing himself to be detained temporarily by a goddess (Circe); secondly, he has chosen to return home even over a promise of immortality and life with a goddess (Calypso). In short, Odysseus' preference for mortal life in Ithaca deflects Alcinous' offer of marriage to Nausicaa without him even having to say it.

So an appreciation of tradition, or the units from which the poet builds his song and the audience interprets it, adds considerably to the subtlety and complexity of the *Odyssey's* narrative. With it, we can hear gentle suggestions and hushed intimations which give colour and depth to the surface of the narrative.

Without it, we are at least partially deaf to all that Homer has to offer.

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Finding Odysseus

If you walk round modern Ithaca with a copy of Homer's *Odyssey*, you probably won't find it very easy to fit Homer's descriptions of Odysseus' native island to anything you can see now. Is that because Homer had never visited Ithaca, because he wasn't attempting to be realistic – or because modern Ithaca isn't Ithaca at all? In a recent book (*Odysseus unbound – the search for Homer's Ithaca*) Robert Bittleston (whose day job is as a management consultant) has argued that the real Ithaca is in fact Paliki, now the western peninsula of Kefalonia but then, he argues, an island. He uses satellite imagery and 3D global visualization techniques to bolster his case, and has the support of experts both in geography and in Homeric studies. Interested? Read more at www.odysseus-unbound.org/